

Tin Soldiers and Nixon's Coming: Assigning Blame for Kent State

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This season marks the 30th anniversary of the Kent State shootings, where four students were killed and nine wounded by national guardsmen in Ohio (May 4, 1970).

Thus, this week also marks 30 years of continuing leftist mythology about the role of President Richard Nixon in the tragedy. Nixon is the left's all-time whipping boy. The anti-Communist Cold Warrior would never be forgiven for getting Alger Hiss. Any lie aimed at getting Nixon was fair game. This reared itself in the Kent State aftermath.

I was reminded of the myth last week while unfortunately tuning in to VH1's "Rock Story." VH1 produces documentaries on the lives of rock and pop stars—sad, degenerate stories. I glance at them just as I occasionally can't help but peer at an auto accident as I drive by. However, VH1 producers recently made a fatal mistake: they took their work seriously. The shows are intriguing when weaving tales of cocaine and heroin abuse, divorce and orgies, depression and ego, and wealth and bankruptcy. But when they address politics—and do so with seriousness—the result is trouble.

The show I mention was hosted by an angry Anthony Edwards of "ER" fame. It focused on protest music by rock stars. Many of the examples were silly. But the true abomination—nothing to shrug off with a mere laugh—was the feature on the 1970s song, "Ohio," by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, written by "artist" Neil Young.

The song's purpose was to express outrage over Kent State. The famous phrase from the song goes:

Tin soldiers and Nixon's coming.
We're finally on our own . . .
Four dead in Ohio.

To a person, all those interviewed on the show, from David Crosby and Graham Nash to high-minded music reviewers, hailed the sagacity of Young's "brilliant" line. One deep-thinking type dubbed the line "the most powerful" part of the song because of what it said about Nixon. Another insisted that the line "made the song."

Please. Actually, the weakest part of the song is that line. It's flat out wrong. It slanders Nixon. It underscores Young's ignorance and unfairness, as well as those who exalt the line.

Nixon had nothing to do with the Kent State shootings.

This matters. These lyrics have an impact. Especially when elites and the dominant media do nothing to refute them. To the contrary, they celebrate the words.

A student once asked me if Nixon were responsible for Kent State, citing these lyrics. Growing up listening to this gobbledygook myself, I had the same question. I naturally assumed he was behind the shootings. Why else would the lyrics say that?

The lyrics clearly suggest Nixon is to blame. This is done by obfuscation and subtlety—by use of a clever line that’s not totally clear. The blame is not perfectly direct, thus allowing the writer to escape responsibility if necessary.

Sadly, these lyrics are not just one phrase in one song. They represent the modus operandi of the radical 1960s-70s left. Indeed, the same technique was used in a movie from the genre, *The Killing Fields*, which was about the genocide in Cambodia under Pol Pot from 1975-79. “The inhumanity, staggering deaths are blamed on Nixon,” reported reviewer John Hartl in 1984. Incredibly, while Nixon’s name pops up repeatedly in the film, Pol Pot is literally not mentioned once. Quite an omission for a vile totalitarian who killed nearly forty percent of his population in four years, the largest murder-percentage of any leader in history.

How can the left be so dishonest in its criticism of Nixon? There are many reasons on many fronts, but let’s stick to Kent State. I asked this question to three academic experts on Vietnam and Kent State. Perhaps as a sign of how incredibly divisive those times were, and remain, all three asked me not to use their names.

The most liberal of the three was then a graduate student teaching at an Ohio college within an hour of Kent State. He notes that Nixon’s military moves in Cambodia sparked the Kent State protests, which ultimately led to the shootings.

Indeed, a week before the shootings, on April 30, 1970, Nixon announced that U.S. troops were going into Cambodia, across the South Vietnam border, to clean out sanctuaries from which Communist forces had long conducted the war.

The anti-war movement went nuts. According to scholar Dwight D. Murphey, there were riots at more than twenty universities, and serious disruptions on 760 campuses. Several hundred universities shut down and canceled the remainder of the spring semester. The National Guard was activated in Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico, Kentucky, and Ohio. Over the next four days, chaos and violence ensued at Kent State, as students rioted, tossed Molotov cocktails, set buildings ablaze, threw rocks and bricks at police, threatened to kill ROTC students and countless others, beat up photographers, and regularly assaulted and spat upon national guardsmen. The morning before the shootings, fifteen separate bomb threats were made on campus.

But the Cambodia excursion only explains the impetus for the protests, and how they were sparked by Nixon policy. What about the shootings? My expert’s response:

What you’re encountering with that music and those lyrics is artistic license. Nixon was only responsible for what caused the protests. The one responsible for deploying the National Guard was the governor of Ohio,

not Nixon. The responsibility for the shootings goes to the guardsmen or even the commander on the scene, certainly not Nixon. . . . But Nixon was the face. The high-profile figure. So they made him the villain.

It wouldn't be the first time.

The other two experts I interviewed were less charitable to the protesters. "They lie," said one, now over sixties years old, approaching retirement from his university in the midwest, and still haunted by the dishonesty and vulgarity he saw in the '60s.

They've always lied. They just make things up. They don't care about truth. They're incredibly dishonest.

The other, now in his late fifties, made a near identical comment, adding:

That's just their typical demonization. The sad thing is they get away with it.

Yes. Not only did they get away with it then, but they do now as well. Worse, lyrics like those of Neil Young are hailed for their wisdom, regardless of the fact that they are completely inaccurate and slanderous. They blame an innocent man. Worse again, those who did the protesting and blaming now write the history of the period from tenured posts at universities and hold dominant positions in media and Hollywood.

Will the truth of this era ever be told? Ω